What is Moral about Moral Outrage?

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Abstract

In this paper we critically review the extant literature on outrage to show that some of the assumptions of the working definitions on outrage are not widely shared, hindering thus cumulative progress of research on this topic. We identify the issue of the disinterestedness of the experiencer of the emotion as a key barrier to understand the moral character of outrage and other emotions. By examining the challenges that this requirement brings, we show that a different characterization of moral emotion is needed. We propose an alternative analysis of outrage, based on a socio-constructionist perspective on emotions. The social norms that underpin the expression, negotiation and prognosis of moral anger allow a richer characterization of the moral character of emotions in general. The constitutive role of social norms is highlighted to show how these ideas can help advance the empirical research on outrage.

Keywords: moral outrage, moral emotions, social norms, socio-constructionism.

What is Moral about Moral Outrage?

It might not be an overstatement to say that there is an explosion of research on moral outrage. This might just be a reflection of our times, where social injustice is more visible and moral outrage more readily voiced. Ranging from studies intending to shed light on the role of outrage in activism (Thomas and McGarty, 2009) to research on the neural underpinnings of outrage and morality in general (Pascual et al., 2013), there is an intense and genuine interest in understanding how outrage is shaping our lives. This increased attention on the topic has not, however, brought about a wide and shared understanding on the nature of the phenomena at hand and, on the contrary, has yielded some contradictory findings.

In this paper our objective is to characterize some elements of the current understanding of outrage as a *moral emotion*, as well as some of the main findings. The picture that emerges from this review is one of a fragmented landscape, where there is no clear agreement on what outrage is and even if it should be considered a moral emotion at all. We then proceed to review the main proposals on moral emotions and reconstruct the elements necessary to understand outrage as a moral emotion. We maintain that the lack of agreement on the precise characterization of its appraisal and causal role on behavior, as well as a lack of clarity on what consequences of outrage are moral, have hindered the possibility of a unified understanding of this phenomenon. With these elements at hand, we put forward a proposal for understanding outrage from a socio constructionist perspective, highlighting the role of social norms in constituting and regulating the moral character of this emotion.

The emotion of our times

Outrage has come to the forefront of the interest in many disciplines, including psychology and philosophy, due to the unstoppable growth of social media. Reports of outrage and of morally outrageous situations are commonplace, ranging all kinds of scenarios and transgressions. It has led some to wonder whether we are living in angrier times (Burkeman, 2019). Reports in popular news

outlets have seemingly capitalized on this by manufacturing news that can generate “outrage porn” (Kreider, 2015), leading to sociologists to label current media (particularly political) as the “outrage industry”. It has even led some to claim that media has fundamentally changed parameters key for the expression—and experience—of this emotion (Haidt and Rose-Stockwell, 2019).

Psychology has not been oblivious to this trend. On one hand, there is a substantial amount of research exploring how online media has modified and maximized the expression and reach of moral outrage (Crockett, 2017; Fan et al., 2019). In this strand of research, we identify ideas from classical emotion theory. Crockett (2017), for example, describing how social media has altered the mechanisms of moral outrage, assumes that it is the perception of moral norm violations what triggers it. Sawaoka and Monin (2018) depart from the idea that moral outrage fulfills an important role motivating pro-social behaviors, such as standing against injustice, whose moral status is unclear when they become viral. Another strand of research, however, has led some theorists to question the identity and function of outrage thus expressed. For example, Rothschild and collaborators (Rothschild et al., 2013; Rothschild and Keefer, 2017) have identified the case of defensive outrage, an outrage whose expression is rather concerned with protecting and enhancing personal identity and moral self-worth, and not so much with upholding some moral principle (Hofmann et al., 2018; see also Monin and Jordan, 2010). Similarly, it has been found that outrage fulfills a key role in signaling one’s virtues (Jordan and Rand, 2020), again casting doubt on its altruistic motivations. Some have gone as far as denying that outrage can be moral (Batson et al., 2007), or that it is even an emotion (Fiske, 2020), since words reify what amounts to persuasion devices. These findings bring into question the moral bearings of outrage, suggesting that it is morally neutral or, at least, that it does not have the behavioral consequences one would expect it to have, such as promoting action towards social change (see Pagano and Huo, 2007).

We believe that behind this apparently contradictory landscape lie different notions of outrage, as well as emphases on different levels of analysis. We begin by identifying disagreements on how to

appropriately characterize outrage as a moral emotion and, more widely, the link between emotions and morality.

What is a moral emotion anyway?

The concept of moral emotion was initially put forward and popularized by Haidt (2003) and it has been since further developed (Cova et al., 2015; Tangney et al., 2006). He proposed that moral emotions are those generally "linked to interests or welfare of either society as a whole or at least of persons other than the judge or agent" (p. 853). He also showed that moral emotions share two prototypical components, elicitors and action tendencies. The presence of these prototypical features is a matter of degree for Haidt, so that the more disinterested the elicitor and the more prosocial the action tendency, the more likely will the emotion be *moral*. Moral emotions are traditionally categorized into four families depending on whether the focus is on the transgressor (other condemning: contempt, anger, disgust), on the victim (other suffering: sympathy), on meeting a moral standard (other praising: gratitude, elevation), or on evaluating the self (self-conscious emotions: shame, guilt, embarrassment) (See also Rozin et al., 1999).

Note that outrage is mostly operationalized as moral anger (see Batson et al., 2007; Lomas, 2019; Hechler and Kessler, 2018; Dubreuil, 2015; Rothschild and Keefer, 2017; Russell and Giner-Sorolla, 2011). Moral anger is one of the other-condemning emotions (Rozin, 1999), triggered by an unfair event and with punishment as its action tendency (Haidt, 2003). In consequence, moral anger can be differentiated from non-moral anger by the construal of the event (a case of unfairness where the self is not involved) and by specifying how the behavior it motivates is prosocial. Anger at someone who prevents me from getting my favorite meal is not moral, as opposed to anger elicited by someone who steals from someone else. Similarly, anger that triggers the direct removal of a threat (Roseman, 2011) is not moral, in contrast with anger that motivates punishing the thief, which ultimately helps upholding socio-moral norms.

Research in the tradition of the socio-functional analysis of emotions (Hutcherson and Gross, 2011; Salerno and Peter-Hagene, 2013; Molho et al., 2017) goes beyond the notion of outrage as moral anger. Stressing the primacy of the condemning function of outrage suggests that moral outrage could be underpinned by three distinct moral emotions: anger, disgust, and contempt.[1] There are some problems with this componential analysis of outrage, including doubts on whether disgust is actually related to morality (Kayyal et al., 2015), whether it can be empirically differentiated from anger (Nabi, 2002), whether disgust fulfills a role beyond amplifying other moral emotions (Royzman et al., 2014; Landy and Goodwin, 2015), and how to account for the inconsistency between anger's and disgust's action tendencies (approach and avoidance, respectively). Here, we restrict our analysis to outrage conceived as a case of moral anger, and thus the conclusions that follow are mute on the componential analysis.

The idea of moral emotion spouse by Haidt presupposes a weak notion of morality (e.g., the kind of considerations associated with societal well-being) that is tremendously useful as a research program and avoids begging the question. It only requires identifying the sets of elicitors and action tendencies whose combination will render a full taxonomy of moral emotions, while also allowing us to distinguish them from non-moral emotions. Notice, however, a couple of key aspects in Haidt's definition. First, moral emotions where the self has an interest occupy an uncomfortable position, since both their elicitors and action tendencies are, per definition, directed towards the well-being of others. This precludes moral emotions associated with purely prudential considerations (e.g., affective responses implied in self-care, such as sympathy for one's own misfortunes, pride for one's achievements, etc.) but also moral emotions of *victims* of transgressions (e.g., when the self, or someone close, is unjustly wronged). Second, elicitors that are morally relevant are those where the self has no stake in the triggering event, where elicitors are understood as a conflation of events and their interpretation (Haidt, 2003, p. 866). This makes it difficult to flesh out the link between the relevant

components of the emotion, since it requires clarity on when the elicitor does not place the self "at stake", as well as when the action tendency initiated by the emotion is not genuinely pro-social. While these points are problematic (we come back to them below), they have not been a hurdle to the recent vigorous research on moral emotions.

Refinements and alternative analyses on the notion of moral emotion have been developed both from philosophy and psychology. From a philosophical point of view Cova (2015), for example, points out five ways to capture the idea of moral emotion: when emotions represent a moral intentional object, when they provide epistemic access to moral facts, when they are a source for moral action, when they contribute to the flourishing of societies, and when they themselves can be the target of moral evaluation. Prinz (Prinz, 2009; Prinz and Nichols, 2010) coincides in pointing out that moral emotions motivate prosocial behavior, and they may both cause and constitute moral judgment (as moral intuitions). These considerations can be grouped—along the lines of the prototypical features proposed by Haidt (2003)—into matters of perception/interpretation (moral intuitions, access to moral facts), on the one hand, and matters of action (prosocial behavior, motivation), on the other. These considerations, crucial as they may be, provide little guidance beyond Haidt's definition, on how moral emotions are to be empirically studied, for they bring us back to the definition of morality, on which there is no agreement (see Prinz, 2009).

Work in psychology, on the other hand, has focused on the *functions* of these emotions as a way to individualize them. Moral emotions, according to Tangney et al (2006), confer to its bearers some form of long-time benefit in their interaction with other members of society, by motivating moral behavior and inhibiting immoral behavior (e.g., anticipated shame). Emotions in general may have several functions, and only some of them can be morally relevant. For example, emotions may have evaluative (e.g., blame), commitment, motivational, and communicative/signaling functions (Noon,

2019, Prinz 2009), and their moral character depends on whether these functions serve themselves a moral purpose.

In this vein, Giner-Sorolla's (2012) Integrative Functional Theory (IFT) of emotion offers a more nuanced analysis, identifying four main functions for emotions in general: an appraisal function, that allows us to interpret the environment and activate the relevant goal; an associative function, which enables learning of simple stimuli associations; a self-regulation function, whereby behavior can be adjusted given the emotional state, end goal, and feedback mechanisms; and a communicative function, by which emotions provide honest signals of bodily states and intentions. What makes these functions *sui generis* in the case of moral emotions is that they might serve a larger moral purpose (as opposed to a selfish goal), or have a moral "usage" (Giner-Sorolla, 2012). This approach shares one of the main assumptions of Haidt's analysis: morality is ultimately about cooperation and the well-being of societies.

Applied to moral emotions, the IFT offers a helpful guide to evaluate whether an emotion is actually moral (by examining the functions it fulfills). However, beyond their moral purpose or usage, it does not tell us what is moral about these functions, that is, what makes certain appraisals, associations, behaviors, or expressions "moral".

Both the philosophical and psychological approaches to the definition of moral emotions share two sets of assumptions: first, the idea that the triggering action must be somewhat appraised as (in)moral and, second, the notion that the behavior they promote is prosocial. As any other emotion, they act as commitment devices. The commitment, in this case, is to behave in a way that is costly in the short term (a moral way) and, thus, signals its content appropriately as deriving from a *moral* interpretation of the situation.

From this landscape, we conclude that emotions can be considered moral insofar as both the construal of the triggering event and the consequences of its promoted behavior are somewhat moral. This further suggests that, if we want to build an empirically robust and coherent research program, a

more precise (and perhaps emotion specific) description of the way moral outrage is construed is required. The ITF approach takes us a step forward in this direction by inviting us to analyze the actual functions performed by moral outrage.

Can outrage ever be moral? Impartial morals and biased anger

In his systematic review, Lomas (2019) identifies a multiplicity of triggers of moral anger, ranging from betrayal and injustice to unfairness and, more generally, witnessing violence. It would seem that moral anger is the emotional response by default to any moral violation. If so, what is particularly moral about outrage? Our review of the work on moral emotions suggests that we need to consider emotions case-by-case in order to determine what is specifically moral about them.

Let's consider the underlying appraisal of outrage. Anger entails several appraisals: goal blockage, group antagonism, threat from a conscious being, threat to the self (Lazarus, 1991), personal goal frustration and *injustice and unfairness* (Giner-Sorolla, 2012). Prima facie, only the latter seems a genuinely moral appraisal and, thus, an elicitor of outrage. This is what Haidt probably has in mind when he posits the *disinterestedness* criterion: elicitors where the self has no stake tend to trigger moral emotions, whereas elicitors involving the self tend to trigger non-moral emotions. Haidt's description in terms of elicitors allows him to talk about events, and their interpretations, as triggers of emotional episodes, in a way that recalls the core relational themes (Lazarus, 1991) of classical appraisal theory. Thus, these elicitors/appraisals are considered moral only when "the self has no stake in the triggering event" (Haidt, 2003, p. 853). We then have it that situations interpreted as unfair or unjust, and where one is not personally involved, would be elicitors/appraisals of moral anger.

A virtue of this analysis is that it clearly precludes the possibility of outrage when the triggering event is a mere goal blockage or frustration (e.g., being angry at my computer for not saving the last paragraph or because my friend did not want to share his candy with me). An undesirable consequence though is that it also precludes self-interested, legitimate moral claims (e.g., outrage at being victim of

an injustice) or claims where a moral wrongdoing concerns somehow the self (e.g., your brother is a victim of an injustice), as elicitors/appraisals of outrage.

Batson and colleagues systematically explore these ideas (Batson, 2007; Batson et al., 2009; Batson, 2011; O'Mara et al., 2011) and take them to their logical conclusion: there are not really any moral emotions, outrage the least of them, since personal involvement is almost invariably present in moral assessments and their subsequent emotional responses. In their experimental work, Batson and colleagues show that empathy is the best predictor of self-reported outrage. Thus, outrage is not a "disinterested emotion", since it appraises situations, and motivate behaviors, that are ultimately related to the self (helping a friend, considering in-group injustices as worse than equivalent out-group injustices, etc.). In other words, moral anger is indistinguishable from personal anger and, then, it is either an unnecessary construct or, at best, a framing strategy to legitimize selfish claims.

If the trigger of outrage is the violation of a norm where the self has no involvement whatsoever, then learning through the news about injustices in distant communities must be equivalent to witnessing them directly, since the triggering event (the norm violation) remains the same. The cases Batson examines are perfectly fitted to test this claim. Batson et al. (2007) and O'Mara et al. (2011) examine unfair exclusion from a group and unfair distribution of goods, where the level of empathy (Batson, 2007), or the degree of proximity and fairness (O'Mara, 2011), are manipulated. In the first case, they find that empathy is the best predictor of anger (personal anger is indistinguishable from moral anger) and that experiencing an exclusion is associated with higher levels of self-reported anger—suggesting anger at harm to the self but not at unfairness *per se*. Furthermore, Batson et al. (2009) consider the case of torture, a morally unambiguous situation, and find that self-reported moral outrage by Americans is higher when the victim is an American soldier, despite participants judging torture as similarly immoral regardless of the victim's nationality, and regardless of the instrumental gains achieved through it. Notice that these findings are consistent with recent research showing that fairness

considerations are modulated by group membership (Mendoza et al., 2014; Abbink and Harris, 2019). All the cases analyzed by Batson and collaborators show that outrage is never truly disinterested and that, if anything, disinterestedness is a predictor of the possible absence of outrage.

Other research on outrage explores a similar motive. Hechler and Kessler (2018) propose that moral anger is mostly triggered by the intention of causing harmful effects, independently from the actual action and its outcomes. Since the negative outcomes of an unfair action result in threats to the self or empathy with the victims, outrage is not really about the self, although the self ends up involved. This dissociation saves nicely the disinterestedness gap. As far as our analysis is concerned, a key point—apart from the fact that the authors report that they did not quite manage to tease apart the differential impact of intentions versus behaviors—is their assumption that the self must not be involved in the elicitor/appraisal. (For other work with a similar premise see Van de Vyver and Abrams (2015)).

Although it is possible to criticize some of this work based on methodological concerns—for example, Batson et al. (2007) do not have a no-instructions control condition to evaluate how these encourage or inhibit empathy, as Giner-Sorolla (2012) points out, or possibly having underpowered studies due to small sample sizes—, what we find more intriguing about it is the unquestioned assumption that experiencing and identifying genuine moral anger requires no involvement of the self. Batson even suggests, anticipating later discussions on virtue signaling (Levy, 2020), that widespread talk of outrage might be symptomatic of moral hypocrisy (Batson, 2011), for it invariably disguises as disinterested one's own concerns.

From Batson's point of view, it is not difficult to call into question the moral usage of other emotion functions. Regarding action tendencies, it follows that "to the degree that these emotions are not moral emotions, any motivation produced by them is not likely to be moral motivation—i.e., directed toward the ultimate goal of upholding moral standards" (Batson, 2011, p. 159). The same idea guides some of the challenges to altruistic punishment, a behavior motivated by emotions like outrage

(Pedersen et al., 2013; Pedersen et al., 2018), and to emotionally motivated behavior more generally (McAuliffe, 2019). Regarding the self-regulation function (which, for our present purposes, partly overlaps with the action tendency), some problems follow as well. For example, it has been found that outrage modulates threats against one's moral identity. Rothschild and Keefer (2017) dubbed this phenomenon 'defensive outrage' and suggest that it can be differentiated from real outrage by individual justice sensitivity (Rothschild and Keefer, 2018). Protecting one's moral identity allows us to reduce the incongruence between our objectives and our actions and, thus, helps us provide a coherent narrative for our actions and, therefore, does not constitute a genuinely moral emotion. As far as the communicative function is concerned, outrage can also be self-serving (Giner-Sorolla, 2012) and fulfill only instrumental purposes, as in the case of virtue signaling (Jordan and Rand, 2020; Levy, 2020). Jordan and Rand (2020) show that reputation cues automatically activate expressions of outrage, because reputation is normally at stake in situations when a norm is violated and action is possible. The implication is, then, that expressions of moral outrage are always intertwined with reputational concerns.

A clear conclusion follows from this approach: given the abundant evidence of self-involvement in its appraisal, expression, and self-regulation, moral outrage is at most very rare. Even if we had a real case of moral outrage, we would not be able to recognize it, for it would be nearly impossible to tease apart its constitutive moral appraisal, action tendency or communicative function, its selfish from selfless elements. There is a "natural kind" of events, namely, norm violations, that trigger outrage, but that—evidence shows—rarely if ever do so without personal involvement.

As we suggested earlier, this conclusion runs counter our intuitions and daily experiences. Presumably, most people experience outrage regarding a matter that is personally relevant to them, such as an unjustified increase in taxes or police brutality in their communities. For most people, moral appraisals might only be possible about matters relevant to the groups they belong to: from families to

schools, and more complex organizations like cities and countries. Arising from this consideration, let's look into three points that call into question the impossibility of moral outrage: reactions to injustices towards the in-group, moral disagreement on (un)fairness, and co-occurrence of emotions when facing injustice.

Quintessential *interested* moral outrage occurs when reacting to injustices against the in-group. In-group moral emotions underlie reactions to unfair social policies (Wakslak et al., 2007; Giner-Sorolla, 2012), and even help explain the rise of social movements (Noon, 2019; Jasper, 2011; Pagano and Huo, 2007). Clearly, characterizing social protest as motivated by selfish motives does not adequately capture the idea of resisting an injustice. That in-group biases guiding our judgments also shape our discussions and disagreements on moral matters, surely do not deprive them of their moral weight, nor transform them automatically into prudential issues. As Giner-Sorolla (2012) points out, when a situation is interpreted as both unfair and a threat to one's group, a legitimate self-interested, moral claim might occur.

There is evidence suggesting that our own ideological commitments determine how events of injustice actually trigger moral outrage. Research on system justification theory (Wakslak et al., 2007; Chapleau and Oswald, 2014; Krauth-Gruber and Bonnot, 2020) shows how ideologies and beliefs shape our perception of what counts as unjust, and thus highlights the deeply group-relative nature of outrage. Wakslak et al. (2007) show that endorsing a system-justifying ideology reduces outrage by social and economic inequalities, lessening support for helping the disadvantaged. This shows that moral outrage cannot be sufficiently described without considering one's point of view, in this case one's moral beliefs and ideologies. Labeling as mere "anger" the emotions experienced by individuals and groups about issues that affect them directly does not allow us to acknowledge their calls for justice and, thus, their status as possible victims.

Moral disagreement would also be impossible if moral outrage was impersonal and triggered by the impartial assessment of unfairness. Only concerning distributive justice, it is possible to identify judgments guided by deservingness, equality, or necessity (Walzer, 2008) that are not necessarily codified as laws. Some in a community might believe resources must be assigned based on merit (to those who deserve them) while some others that they must be assigned based on need. This would be a genuine case of moral disagreement, with competing moral claims, and competing moral emotional reactions. If a moral emotion requires a "view from nowhere", to borrow Thomas Nagel's expression, moral disagreement would be very difficult to account for. After all, outrage triggered by justice-as-deservingness infractions are just as moral as outrage triggered by need-based-justice infractions. The shape this kind of disagreements takes in real life crucially depends on the fact that the competing claims are socially and politically situated, that is, that they express a certain point of view.

Lastly, in the case of injustice against the in-group, moral outrage is only one of several emotions we can pin onto the situation: fear, hate, and contempt may also occur (Jasper, 2011). Moral outrage is not all there is when we consider the emotional distress caused by being subject to an injustice. Does this mean, then, that outrage is *less* moral when occurs in tandem with more self-centered emotions? What about being a victim of intentional harm? Describing emotions as successive is most of the time an analytical simplification that does not make justice to the complexity of the subjective experience in a highly charged emotional episode. Co-occurring and mixed emotions (Berrios et al., 2015) are a robust experience, one very likely involved in cases of violation of moral standards, where the same situation can be appraised in several, even contradictory ways (Larsen and McGraw, 2014). Recognizing that an unfair treatment elicits not only outrage, but sadness or fear does not speak against the norm-breaking appraisal.

In order to offer a description of moral outrage that, on the one hand, guarantees its status as a coherent emotional response to injustice and, on the other, allows empirical research that distinguishes

moral from non-moral components, two points need clarification. First, how exactly the involvement of the self, far from debilitating the moral status of moral outrage, coexists with the fact that is injustice and unfairness what triggers it. Second, how different functions of moral outrage, and different co-occurring emotions, interact with one another. The first point requires constructing a notion of morality that brings to balance, at the level of our emotional response, concern for others but also for oneself, cooperation, and pro-social behavior but also the expression of conflicting social and political claims. The second point requires spelling out in more detail the components of the outrage appraisal, so that we can adequately isolate the interplay between this and other functions (see ITF above), and between outrage and other emotions.

Norms and emotions

To unpack the tension between involvement of the self and the moral character of outrage, let us rehash the classical Euthyphro dilemma: "Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?" (Plato, *Euthypro* 10a). For our purposes: Does what is outrageous prompt that emotional response because it is outrageous, or is it outrageous because it prompts that emotional response. Given that the outrageous involves an assessment of unfairness and injustice, and such assessment appeals to an allegedly objective, impartial right or good, the question may be put this way: Does the appraisal prompt outrage because it is allegedly objective/impartial, or is it allegedly objective/impartial because it prompts outrage. If the first, how can an objective, impartial moral judgment (the appraisal/trigger) be constitutive, cause or co-occur in a meaningful way with the always subjective, partial emotion where the self is inevitably involved? If the second, how can outrage depart from a plausible, even if incomplete, interpretation of the situation? How can be informative of a situation, group-bonding and, therefore, adaptive?

Discussions between objectivist and subjectivist accounts of emotions abound in philosophy (Sousa, 2001) and have direct echoes in contemporary psychology. Kohlberg's objectivist model

assumes, as the goal of socio-moral development, an ideal observer who transcends the limits of parochial and conventional norms to ponder universal issues of autonomy and justice. Given that violations of fairness and autonomy are self-evident, taking *any* point of view would imply a partial view (e.g., non impartial) and thus a non-moral (at most conventional?) judgment and decision. The objective nature of unfairness and injustice fits well with the impossibility of moral outrage, since emotions are by definition experienced by someone, from a point of view and, thus, partial. It is not casual that objectivist accounts, such as this one, rely on a strict separation of reason and emotion, and depict moral development as the transcendence of the latter, not as something to be achieved within or along with our emotions.

Haidt's subjectivism suffers from the opposite problem. If emotional, intuitive reactions are enough to moralize a situation (e.g., outrage projects injustice onto the world), then it is not possible to have agreements on injustice, nor emotions can have any normative value.[2] The subjective nature of unfairness and injustice saves the possibility of moral outrage, but it blurs the difference between moral and non-moral concerns: as far as the appraisal is concerned, either all emotions are somehow moral or none of them are.

Framing the problem of moral outrage as a tug of war between objectivist and subjectivist approaches irremediably leaves us with either a lofty and distant observer, to whom we cannot attribute emotion, or a situated actor, driven exclusively by selfish interests, of whom we cannot predicate moral concerns. If moral outrage is to be found somewhere, it is where subjective and objective concerns meet: the values we endorse, the norms that express them and their scope.

Think of the case of witnessing someone cutting in line: this might provoke a reaction ranging from mere annoyance to anger. If you are informed that this person just arrived in the country and did not know about the norm or could not recognize the situation as a situation where the norm applies, it is likely you would excuse his behavior and your anger recedes. No matter how general a norm is, the

point stands: injustice always involves a norm and its scope. If I recognize that a norm does not apply, I cannot interpret the situation as a norm violation and, therefore, outrage would not take place. But very importantly, if I do not recognize the norm as applicable, or at least related, to me, I cannot interpret the situation as a norm violation either and, therefore, outrage would not take place. For example, if I come from a place where people do not queue, and do not recognize queuing as applicable to me, I would not be outraged by the person cutting in. The same thing happens, we believe, when I consider a norm as applicable to other person but *especially not to me*: in this case, if I am to be outraged, the norm should relate to me, or people like me. A boss outraged by an employee's disobedience, for example, would be a case in point.

The scope of norms always concern myself and at least one "other": this contrast between myself and others, between my group and others, is at the core of what counts as fair, and oblige us to incur in some sort of moral reasoning: Why does this norm apply to you? Why does it apply to you, vis-à-vis me? What's moral about it is not necessarily its abstractness and objectivity, let alone its validity and truth, but the fact that it looks to the questions *why a norm applies to someone else*, and *how is the norm related to me*—the answers to which may range from the most parochial, subjective considerations to the most universal, objective ones.

This sorts out the Euthyphro dilemma: the outrageous prompts a particular emotional response because it is outrageous, that is, because there is recognition of a norm violation. However, this recognition, although about others, involves the self. And this is the case whether subjective or objective considerations are brought to the table. This explains outrage's enormous plasticity to framing strategies: we can manage to keep ourselves outraged by making norms applicable to others, by relating them to ourselves, and by invoking in the process the whole range of available reasons, from the most parochial to the most universal. Similarly, we can manage to not feel outrage even when we apparently should: by questioning either the applicability of the norm or its relation to the self.

Emotions related to norms can be better understood as *modes of perception* (Sousa, 2001): they give us access to certain sorts of knowledge but also reveal value. Moral outrage (felt or observed) gives access to the norms that are deemed to be violated, as do disgust and contempt (when moral), and also reveals their respective value *qua* norms. Thus, one can only be angered at injustice when there is some shared standard of what it is. This standard, however, is not monolithic, but challenged by different claims in a permanent, complex process of negotiation, imposition, resistance, and acceptance. Outrage reveals a system's values but also helps construct them. Describing an experience as moral outrage implies understanding the relevant normative aspects of the sociocultural system in which the emotion takes part.

Socio-constructionist theories of emotion (Barrett, 2017; Weber, 2004; Averill, 1984) allow the possibility of having shared norms as constitutive elements of the emotions. In common with appraisal analyses, they share that anger is elicited by a situation appraised as unfair. Unlike appraisal theories, the socio-constructionist perspective emphasizes the social nature of these appraisals, by directly appealing to the social norms that constitute and regulate emotions. Thus, emotions are both an expression of and subject to social control. Identifying the norms that govern moral anger are then indispensable to its proper explanation.

A constructionist analysis

Given the inherently social nature of outrage, we rely on Averill's (1984) constructionist analysis of anger to make sense of the fine mechanisms through which outrage occurs. Averill proposes several types of rules that constitute and regulate emotions: rules of appraisal (which define the proper object of anger), rules of behavior (relevant to understand the normative action tendencies and expressions of anger), rules of prognostication (on the temporal evolution of anger episodes), and rules of attribution of anger (both on events and the self). Relevant for our current purpose are the rules of appraisal. Averill (1984) distinguishes between the object of an emotion and its proximal cause, where only the

first one relies on social norms. The objects of anger, which allows us to tell apart different kinds of emotional episodes, comprise instigations, targets, and objectives. Instigations, generally, refer to unjustified harms, norm breaking and even negligence; targets to the relevant persons or institutions; and objectives to the correction of wrongdoings. In Averill's scheme, moral outrage can be then triggered by appraisals of injustice (representations of relevant norm breaking events) aimed at a person or institution, with the objective of correcting the wrongdoing. Moral anger so conceived also implies an appraisal of responsibility and blame. The key difference between moral and non-moral anger is then the social relations involved in both the object of anger and the rules of appraisal.

An interesting empirical consequence of this approach is that non-appropriate cases of outrage become key to understand the appraisal of moral anger. That is, cases where outrage is considered unjustified or excessive. Feeling outraged at my computer for breaking down after several years of use borders on the incomprehensible. This is presumably because this situation does not afford the possibility of responsibility attribution, which always requires intention. Online shaming, for instance, is a kind of moral reckoning of an offender frequently considered disproportionate to the point that it may lead to empathize and even justify the offender (Sawaoka and Monin, 2018). In cases like this, complex social norms on the appropriateness of the appraisal, the behavior, the prognostication, and the attribution are at play. These norms are revealed by these failures, as well as the conditions under which they are fine-tuned. There may be violations of norms of appraisal (we take for unjust something just), violations of norms of behavior (we overreact or underreact), violations of norms of prognostications (we tirelessly pedal our outrage feelings and make everything an instance of the norm violation), violations of norms of attribution (we take it personal when we shouldn't, we don't when we should).

Thus, outrage can also be a form of social struggle, negotiation and even control (Nugier et al., 2007), and can help explain subsequent conflict when resisting these norms. These prescriptive and proscriptive rules on what is (un)justifiable as an adequate instance of moral outrage, are constantly

evolving and are always in need of being pinpointed: we see this very clearly in our online interactions. Outrage is not only moral as far as it concerns another's violation of a norm I am related to. It is moral because the circumstances of its occurrence are heavily socially regulated: outrage implies some grasping the larger social logic of the emotion.

Outrage's plasticity (the fact that is suitable to constant framing and reframing) and sociality (the fact that every aspect of it is socially regulated), account as well for its conflictive character. Anger is said to be a *conflictive emotion* (Averill, 1984), which means that there are competing social norms shaping it. These norms involve, on one hand, a duty to retaliate forcefully against perceived injustice and wrongdoing and, on the other hand, to resolve disagreements and instigations in a respectful and forgiving way. That is, although moral anger is many times the morally appropriate response to injustice, it can also lead to morally inappropriate behaviors, such as revenge or disproportionate punishment. This tension is recognized in legal traditions around the world, as Averill rightly points out: anger may backfire when it blocks the possibility of the transgressor's acknowledging of the wrongdoing and when it creates violence. It is sometimes a duty to be outraged, but it is also a risky state.

The conflictive nature of outrage highlights the functional character of this analysis. Moral anger functions can be distinguished at three levels. At the physiological level, it prepares us for aggression and action more generally. At the psychological level it prompts the correction of wrongdoings. At the social level it helps us reassert, uphold, or contest (moral) standards of behavior. The possible conflict between the psychological function (correcting a wrongdoing could entail to forcibly remove a threat or obstacle) and the social one (preserve social harmony) might explain the apparently ambiguous moral character of outrage. While this solution is not new and share its basic elements with both ITF (Giner-Sorolla, 2012) and other functional theories of anger (Nelissen et al., 2013), our emphasis lies on the subject's representation of the relevant norms and their scope. Only when one explicitly acknowledges

or empirically determines the norm that the experiencer of outrage considers is being violated, and how it relates to the self, one can talk about moral outrage.

This perspective takes us again to the same conclusion: the moral character of anger cannot be properly understood unless we take into account how the person who experiences it (and its reference group) is related to the applicable norm, and how this norm comes to be constituted. These norms are not always transparent, they evolve, they are prone to constant negotiation, deliberation, and even contestation, different groups push different perspectives, and sometimes, their consequences are far from moral.

Conclusions

In this paper we have presented a reading on the current understanding of moral outrage, an emotion extensively researched but only partially understood. While some approaches stress its pro-social function—in light of social media's amplifying role—, others question its identity and moral character, either by pointing out the self-serving nature of moral anger or questioning its very moral nature.

By tracing back and examining the origins and developments around the idea of moral emotion, we have established that the problem lies in the conceptualization of its two main aspects, action tendencies and its moral character itself. While there is a wide agreement on what constitutes the prosocial character of the action tendencies of outrage, the disinterestedness aspect of the elicitor, which captures its moral character, is problematic. This is a fundamental challenge, since the question of what is moral about moral emotions hinges on how we are to understand the involvement of the self and the concern for others. This led us to explore in detail how current theories on moral emotion conceptualize outrage. By operationalizing outrage as moral anger, that is, anger at unfairness where the self is not involved, these theories do not manage to articulate the disinterested aspect of it with the necessary involvement of the self all emotions inherently presuppose. As a result, they end up

conceiving either an emotion triggered by purely objective judgements with no involvement of the self, or as a framing device to mask personal and selfish interests, which makes it a hypocritical emotion with a dubious moral nature. In the first case, outrage would not be an emotion, in the second it would not be moral. This is why some have claimed the impossibility of moral outrage in particular, and moral emotions in general.

To tackle the consequences of the under-specification of the notion of disinterestedness, we propose to bring back norms into the characterization of moral emotions to account for an expression, experience, and communication of outrage that is about others but where the self is inevitably involved. Acknowledging the central role of social norms for the experience of moral outrage, allow us to characterize its moral nature beyond the confines of the individual, and thus opening up the possibility of a richer description of this emotion. These norms are in constant flux and are subject to negotiation, contestation, and development due to their socially constructed character. To provide a unified account of moral outrage we need to map out which are the relevant norms and how they come to be, evolve, and how people live by it.

The somewhat dubious moral nature of outrage can be explained by its conflictive nature, that is by the alternate sets of social norms that govern its legitimacy and expression, as well as how it connects with other emotions, and their normative demands. In this way, characterizing outrage requires identifying conflict between social norms, on the one hand, and conflict between its possible different functions, on the other. Think, for example, of online outrage. Online expressions of moral anger are more readily deemed virtue signaling because the behavior associated with the correction of the wrongdoing (assuming that outrage leads to the correction of wrongdoing) is not accessible beyond the actual communicative function. That is, we do not know if communicating outrage entails behaving in a certain way beyond the online sphere, and thus fails to be unambiguously perceived as moral.

This socio constructionist analysis of moral outrage is not the only way to incorporate norms in the explanation of moral emotions. Nelissen and Zeelenberg (2009) do a similar thing by distinguishing proximal and ultimate functions. Fitouchi et al. (2022) put the notion of obligation, a normative concept, at the center of what a moral emotion is, making anger and guilt more prototypical as moral emotions. Even more fine-grained appraisal analyses (Scherer and Moors, 2019) incorporate these concerns, as do alternative versions of social constructionism (especially Barret, 2017). We put forward an approach to the study of moral outrage (extendable to other moral emotions and compatible with the aforementioned analyses) that puts it against the backdrop of a normative net, where norms are constantly upheld, challenged, transformed. This approach allows us to (1) make sense of the involvement of the self, (2) articulate its disinterestedness and prosociality aspects while maintaining the possibility of moral disagreement, (3) account for the interplay between different functions (psychological and social) and between different levels of analysis (appraisal, attribution, behavior, prognostication), (5) research more accurately the mechanisms of its plasticity and conflictive character, and (6) identify inappropriate outrage and how it falls outside what standards. Crucially, to study moral emotions we do not need a fully-fledged notion of morality, or a hard divide between moral and social norms. Outrage brings forth a whole arrange of moral claims (partial or impartial, subjective or objective, particular or universal), configuring a changing, contested, evolving landscape where moral reasoning progresses individually and collectively.

Conceiving moral outrage under this lens also brings some exciting challenges to conceive it as an evolving emotion. Establishing new social norms related to fair behavior is surely associated with outrage at their violation. Is outrage key for understanding how a social norm gains its force? This also entails specifying how outrage, conceptualized from a socio constructionist viewpoint, can be coherent with a causal explanation of appraisals analyses (Scherer and Moors, 2019), where the elements we bring about to interpret a situation as outrageous can be adequately distinguished and, hopefully,

controlled in experimental research. All in all, a better understanding of outrage and its social norms might be key to understand its moral character and causal role, and, even more, to understand how fairness is born and evolves from our emotions.

Conflict of interest

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Notes

[1] Or sometimes only two of these, anger and disgust (see, for example, Sawoka, 2018).

[2] The problematic use of the expression "trigger/appraisal" in Haidt's characterization of moral emotions is a testimony to this issue, since it conflates what appraisal theorist called core relational themes (Lazarus, 1991) with subjective assessments of a situation.